DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 255 EA 030 576

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TITLE Principals' Perceptions of School-Level Environments in Effective and Ineffective Urban Schools.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Administrator Role; *Educational Attainment; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Learning Experience; *Principals; Teacher Attitudes; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

School-level environments differ from the classroom environments. Classroom environments involve students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers and other students in their classrooms; school-level environments involve mainly teachers and school staff's perceptions of their work environment, their relationship with other teachers, senior staff, and students. Research centering on teachers' perceptions of the school environment provide the current knowledge base in this field; however, principals' perceptions of school environment remain to be explored. Eight urban school principals--four each from effective and ineffective schools--participated in this study. Results indicated that, in general, these principals had positive perceptions of their school-level environment despite the adverse conditions in urban public schools. Principals from effective schools, however, perceived significantly greater teacher interpersonal relations with their students, colleagues, and parents. These school principals also rated their student academic orientation and school standards higher than their counterparts. They also had more confidence in their leadership, they motivated teachers more, and they asked teachers to participate in decision making more than did principals from ineffective schools. (Contains 48 references.) (DFR)

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ED 444 255

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
April 19-23, Montreal, Canada

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The study of learning environment has gradually evolved into two independent fields of classroom-level and school-level environments, despite their simultaneous developmental and logical linkage (Fraser & Rentoul, 1982; Fraser, 1986). While the classroom learning environment has been well examined and its association with student learning outcome determined (Fisher, Henderson, & Fraser, 1997; Fraser & Fisher, 1986; Fraser & Wubbels, 1995; Goh, Young, & Fraser, 1995; Knight & Waxman, 1990; Waxman, Huang, Anderson, & Weinstein, 1997; Wong & Fraser, 1996), the school-level environment has been less intensively investigated (Fisher & Fraser, 1991a). The school-level environment differs from the classroom environment. The classroom-level environment involves students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers and other students in their classrooms, whereas the school-level environment involves mainly teachers and school staff's perceptions of their work environment, their relationship with other teachers, senior staff, and students. Research on school-level environments rests on the organizational theory and the assumption that schools can be viewed as formal organizations (Anderson, 1982; Moos, 1974; Thomas, 1976; Hoy, Tarter, & Bliss, 1990). In general, the school environment can be considered more global than the classroom environment (Fisher, Fraser, Wubbels, & Brekelmans, 1993).

The rationale for the study of school-level environment lies in the educational literature suggesting that a good school environment is associated with student achievement. If teachers have a good working environment, then student will achieve (Fisher, Fraser, Wubbels, & Brekelmans, 1993). During the past two decades, research on the school-level environment has tended to focus on teachers' perceptions of their school-level work environments. Research studies examined (1) the validation of instruments (Dorman, 1999; Fisher & Fraser, 1991b), (2) teachers' actual and preferred perceptions of school environments at various stages and contexts (Fisher, Kent, & Fraser, 1998; Heroman, Pol, & Daniel, 1997; Huang & Waxman, 1993, 1995; Jensen, Shepston, Killmer, & Connor, 1994; Templeton & Jensen, 1993), and (3) organizational approaches to relate school climate with school outcome and effectiveness (Claudet, 1999; Claudet & Ellett, 1994; Loupe, Ellett, Park, & Naik, 1994). Although these research findings

have provided the current knowledge base in this field, an influential administrative group in schools -- principals -- and their perceptions of school environment remain to be explored. According to the U. S. Department of Education statistics, there were 79,618 public school principals and 25,015 private school principals for the academic year of 1993-94 (NCES, 1997) and the total number of principals will stay around 100,000 for the coming years. This large group of school administrators who lead the school and exercise tremendous influence on educational productivity should be examined in order to address meaningfully the teaching and learning environment in the school. In a study investigating the association between principals' interpersonal behavior and teacher's perceptions of school environment, Cresswell and Fisher (1996) found that there was a significant relationship between them. Teachers' assessment of their school environment is affected by principal leadership style and whether if teachers are given responsibility and independence to carry out their tasks. The study showed that uncertain, aggressive and disapproving behaviors by the principal generally had negative effects on teachers' assessment of the school-level environment.

The role of principals in shaping school climate and school effectiveness has been documented in a number of educational leadership and learning environments' studies (Cresswell & Fisher, 1996; Dinham; 1993; Fisher & Cresswell, 1998; Friedkin & Slater, 1994; Krug, 1992; Peterson, 1988, 1998). Research has found that principals create distinct working environments within schools, and that these different kinds of environments are highly predictive of teacher satisfaction and school effectiveness (Anderman, 1991; Goodlad, 1983). Goodlad (1983) concluded that the perceptions of principals in "more satisfying" schools were congruent with those of the teachers in these schools. Krug (1992) found a positive correlation between principal's self-ratings of instructional leadership and student achievement. Fisher and Creswell (1998) further investigated actual and ideal principal interpersonal behavior and noted that there was a large degree of congruence between the teachers' average perceptions of the principals and the principals' average perceptions of themselves. While both teachers and principals perceived actual principal interpersonal behavior as being cooperative, both groups

showed the ideal principal interpersonal behavior to be even more cooperative and less opposing.

The school environment is one of the central problems of urban schools (Bliss, 1993). A nourishing and safe school environment is particularly critical for urban schools where low academic achievement and personal development, high drop out rate and teacher burnout are the norms. Because of the high percentage of students at risk of failure and poor social and economic conditions found in urban communities, addressing the problems of urban schools has been one of the most important educational issues in the United States (Hodgkinson, 1991; Peng, Wang, & Walberg, 1992). How to foster a positive school environment where teachers and school administrators value student learning, actively participate in making decisions about various school policies, and build good relationships with colleagues, students, and parents is the key to bringing about improvement in these schools. No doubt, principals in urban public schools face a tremendous challenge turning around adversity and cultivating a healthy and promising school-level environment.

Current research has provided compelling evidence that effective principals are a key element in schools characterized by high student achievement (Baron, 1993). Moreover, there has been much educational literature that helps to evaluate and identify traits of effective school leaders (Davis, 1998b; Reeves, 1998; Thomas, 1992). For example, Craig, Guetzow & Norris (1993) interviewed three principals and five randomly chosen teachers from their respective schools to examine the interrelationship between the principals' value commitments and leadership characteristics and the teachers' perception of school effectiveness. They noted that school effectiveness is not a set of individual conditions but rather an interaction among many variables that contribute to an environment which is conducive to teaching and learning and that leadership is crucial and highly related to all effectiveness variables. Davis (1998a) further investigated 99 California public school superintendents' perspectives on the involuntary departure of public school principals. He concluded six main reasons why principals lost their jobs. The principal failed to (a) meet expectations for student academic achievement, (b)

maintain a safe and orderly environment, (c) provide a clear vision and direction for the school, (d) promote collaborative decision making, (e) accept new and innovative ideas, (f) effectively organize administrative tasks, activities, and use of time, and (g) effectively manage issues relating to cultural diversity. In other words, factors (a) to (g) denote traits commonly associated with effective school principals.

Effective schools must have effective leaders. Such leaders are those who can create and implement a vision of the school climate that contains within it the values on which excellence is built (Sashkin, 1988). The school environment is the broader context of climate of the school that either facilitates or constrains classroom instruction and student learning (Shields, 1991). It is, therefore, important to examine school principals in effective and ineffective schools to identify factors that may differentiate school effectiveness, including principal's perceptions of their school-level environments and their professional profiles.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate principals' perceptions of school-level environments in effective and ineffective urban public schools. The dimensions of the school-level environment include principals' perceptions of teachers' relationships with colleagues, students, and parents; students' academic orientation; school standards; principal leadership; participatory decision making; curriculum innovation; facility, resources and safety in school; and the need for change in school organizational structure. Along these dimensions and principals' background, the present study addresses three research questions:

(1) Are there significant differences between principals of effective and ineffective schools in their perception of their school-level environments?

(2) Are there significant differences between principals of effective and ineffective schools in their support of change in school organizational structures?

(3) What are the professional profiles of these two groups of principals?

Methods

Participants

Participants of the present study were eight urban school principals from a metropolitan school district located in a south central state of the United States. These principals were selected because their schools represented either effective or ineffective schools in the district. Of the eight principals, four were from effective schools and four were from ineffective schools. The criteria for the classification of effective and ineffective schools included (a) the school district ratings, and (b) norm-referenced standardized test scores. The school district evaluates annually all campuses according to a state-wide assessment of academic skills, their progress in test scores, teacher and student attendance, and drop-out rates.

Each group of principals included one high school principal, one middle school principal, and two elementary school principals. Both high school principals were male, and all middle and elementary school principals were female. Schools from the two groups were comparable in most of the demographic background variables, including school size (except for elementary schools), teacher and student gender ratios, teacher and student racial compositions, percentage of teacher and student attendance rates, and percentage of teachers with advanced degrees. However, effective schools had lower student mobility and lower percentages of students on reduced or free lunch than ineffective schools. The average percentages of students passing state administered standardized tests in effective schools were about 20% higher than those from ineffective schools. Table 1 displays the demographic comparison between these effective and ineffective schools.

Insert Table 1 about here

Instrument

There are several established instruments designed for the assessment of school-level environment. The development and validation of these instruments have been well described and discussed in previous studies (Anderson, 1982; Fisher & Fraser, 1983, 1991a, 1991b;

Fraser, 1994; Fraser & Rentoul, 1982; Fraser & Walberg, 1991; Fraser, Williamson, & Tobin, 1987; Genn, 1984; Moos, 1981; Rentoul & Fraser, 1983). Among these instruments, the most widely used is perhaps the School Level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ) (Fisher & Fraser, 1991b; Fraser & Fisher, 1982; Rentoul & Fraser, 1983). The SLEQ grew out of the work of the Work Environment Scale (Fisher & Fraser, 1983; Moos, 1981). It measures teachers' perceptions of psychological dimensions of their work environment at school. It includes eight scales: Student Support, Affiliation, Professional Interest, Staff Freedom, Participatory Decision Making, Innovation, Resource Adequacy, and Work Pressure. The SLEQ has been tested in a variety of research studies and has been found to be valid and reliable to serve its purpose.

This study attempts to adapt the existing SLEQ for the use of principals since principals are in the same school environment as their teachers. Because principals oversee school functions from administrators' perspectives, this School-level Environment Questionnaire for Principals (SLEQP) include some scales not in the SLEQ. It contains ten scales consisting of selected related items from the School Learning Environment Questionnaire (Fisher & Fraser, 1983, 1991b; Rentoul & Fraser, 1983), Work Environment Scale (Fisher & Fraser, 1983; Moos, 81), National Education Longitudinal Study of 88 (NCES, 1992), and the School and Staffing Survey (NCES, 1994). Dimensions chosen for the SLEQP follow Moos's (1974) classification of organizational work environment. Three of the scales measure the Relationship dimensions of school-level environment: Teacher-Student Relations, Teacher Affiliation, and Teacher-Parent Relations. Three of the scales measure Personal Development dimensions: Principal Leadership, Student Academic Orientation, and School Standards. The remaining four scales measure System Maintenance and System Change dimensions: Participatory Decision-Making, Curriculum Innovation, Facilities/Resources/Security, and Change in School Organizational Structures. Table 2 displays the ten scales, a brief description and an example for each scale.

Insert Table 2 about here

Each scale contains only three items except the last scale includes five items. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert-type measure, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. A score of 5 means that the principal perceived the scale most positively and a score of 1 least positively. The alpha reliability coefficients for the 10 scales range from .64 to .95 with a mean of .78 (See Table 3). The average discriminant validity (interscale correlation) coefficient of .39 is somewhat higher than expected, suggesting there are moderate correlations between some of the scales. A section measuring principals' demographic and professional background was added to the instrument.

Procedure & Analysis

Prior to the end of the Spring Semester, a trained researcher contacted the principals and arranged a schedule to conduct the principal survey. All principals were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Descriptive statistics were performed to provide the mean values and standard deviations for the two groups on the ten scales. Due to the small sample size, effect sizes were computed to determine whether there were significant differences between the two principal groups in their school-level environments. Frequency distributions were prepared to provide the professional profile of these two groups of principals.

Results

The results indicate that, in general, these principals had positive perceptions of their school level environments despite the adverse conditions in urban public schools. All scales had a mean value above 3.00. In the effective schools, the scales with the highest mean values were Principal Leadership and Teacher-Student Relations (M = 4.67, SD = 0.47 for both scales), and the scale with the lowest mean was Change in School Organizational Structures (M = 3.60, SD = 1.60). In the ineffective schools, the scale with the highest mean value was Principal Leadership (M = 4.25, SD = 0.32), Curriculum Innovation (M = 4.25, SD = 0.57), and Facilities and Resources (M = 4.25, SD = 0.74). The scale with the lowest mean was Teacher- Parent

Relations (M = 3.42, SD = 0.96), followed by Participatory Decision Making (M = 3.50, SD = 0.84).

Table 3 displays the reliability and comparison of the two groups of principals' perceptions of their school-level environments.

The effect sizes reveal that there were significant differences between the two groups of principals' perceptions of their school environments. Eight out of the ten scales had an effect size greater than .50, and five of them greater than 1.00. Effective school principals rated Student Academic Orientation, Principal Leadership, School Standards, Teacher-Student Relations, Teacher Affiliation, Teacher-Parent Relations, and Participatory Decision Making significantly higher than principals of ineffective schools. On the other hand, principals of ineffective school showed greater support for Change in School Organizational Structures than effective school principals. There were no significant differences in the two groups of principals' ratings of Curriculum Innovation and Facilities/ Resources/Security.

Insert Table 3 about here

Frequency distributions of the principal profile indicate that the two groups of principals share some similarities in their professional background but differ in others. In each group, three of the principals had a master's degree and one had a doctoral degree. Only one principal in each group had been employed full-time in career other than education. When being asked for the last grade level they taught, each group had one principal indicating that he or she taught at the elementary school level, one at the intermediate school, one at the middle/junior high school, and one at the high school level. Nonetheless, there were differences in the two groups of principals' administrative certification status, years of experience, and their intention to continue serving as a principal. All effective school principals were certified to be a principal by the state, whereas three principals in ineffective schools were certified and one was not. Principals from effective schools also had longer years of experience in teaching and in serving as a principal in their

current school. Two principals from effective schools thought that they would probably continue as a principal for more than 5 years, and two would stay in education throughout their career. On the other hand, two principals from the ineffective schools might continue for another 1 to 5 years, one principal was not certain, and only one would probably continue for more than 5 years.

Discussion

This study identifies a few school level environment variables that differentiate effective and ineffective urban public schools. Effective school principals perceived significantly greater teacher interpersonal relations with their students, colleagues, and parents. This echoes prior research that found substantial correlations between interactive teacher behavior and cognitive and affective student outcomes (Wubbels, Brekelmans, & Hooymayers, 1991). Effective school principals also rated their student academic orientation and school standards higher than their counterparts. It is evident that principal leadership can promote a school climate where there is an academic emphasis and expectation of success (Squires, 1983). Effective school principals had more confidence in their leadership than ineffective school principals. They let teachers know what was expected of them, they talked to teachers frequently about their instructional practices, and motivated teachers to work to their full capacity. Furthermore, principals in effective schools responded more frequently that they asked teachers to participate in decisions concerning instructional and administrative policies than principals from ineffective schools. These findings are in agreement to Levine's (1991) study on school effectiveness. In his review of guidelines to enhance school effectiveness, he noted that flexibility and independence in making decisions about instruction and other aspects of education are correlated to effectiveness, but that, on the other hand, success also requires considerable direction and support form central leadership.

Principals in effective schools were less supportive to changes in school organizational structures than principals from ineffective schools. A plausible explanation of this discrepancy

may be due to the fact that principals in effective schools were more satisfied with their current school structures and perceived less need to change.

The principal profile showed that effective school principals had longer working experience and that they were all certified as administrators. Not unexpectedly, all effective school principals expressed intention to continue their principalship for more than 5 years whereas three principals from ineffective schools did not think they would.

The findings of the present study have implications for the improvement of school effectiveness. Foremost, they suggested that differences in principals' perceptions of their school level environment reflect their school effectiveness. Since school climate or environment is relevant to work in the school improvement field (Kallestad, Olweus, & Alsaker, 1998), it is useful to understand principals' perceptions in order to design interventions that may foster factors favorable to school environment. Second, characteristics of effective schools include effective school leadership (Druian, 1986). Since effective school principals had stronger professional background than ineffective school principals, strategies and policies may be developed to enhance principals' professional competency. Effective school principals also demonstrated certain leadership traits like promoting collaborative decision making, accepting innovative ideas, maintaining a safe and orderly environment, and setting high school standards. Principal preparation programs in higher education institutions must be willing to develop these leadership characteristics. Third, the feedback from this study may help principals to understand better the strengths and weaknesses of their school-level environment and reflect on their own leadership style.

Limitations of the Study

Although effort has been made to match the schools in various aspects so that the grouping of effective and ineffective schools is as comparable as possible, this study may have limited generalizability because of the small sample size and the urban setting. The methods for analyzing the data are also confined to those that apply to small sample subjects. Nevertheless, this study may serve as a pilot study for the school-level environment for principals and other

school administrators. More effort is needed to verify the findings by administering the survey to a large number of principals and to include qualitative data such as interviews, observations, and so forth to provide insight on the relationship between principals' perceptions of school-level environment and school effectiveness. It may also be necessary to include other relevant items in each scale to increase the reliability and validity of the instrument.

Future Research

For future research, empirical and correlational studies need to be conducted to (a) examine other factors that contribute to differences in the perceptions of principals from effective and ineffective schools and to (b) explore the possible relationships between principal profiles and their perceptions of school-level environment. To provide a comprehensive understanding of school-level environment, however, comparative study of the school-level environment perceived by the principals and teachers in the same schools are also recommended.

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Table 1

Demographic Comparison between Effective and Ineffective Schools

School	Effectv. high sch.	Ineffectv. high sch.	Effectv. mid. sch.	Ineffectv. mid. sch.	Effectv. elem. schs.	Ineffectv. elem.schs.
Size (students enrolled)	3474	3101	1244	1241	640	344
Teachers						
Gender						
Male	43	49	29	26	14	14
Female	57	51	71	74	86	86
Ethnicity						
African	28	27	41	56	48	55
Asian	2	2	0	0	2	3
Hispanic	8	16	3	5	15	11
White	62	55	56	39	37	29
Advanced degree(Master & over)	35	39	35	37	35	29
Years of teaching experience	11	12	9	12	14	9
Average attendance rate	94	95	95	95	95	93
Students						
Gender						
Male	52	53	54	52	51	52
Female	48	47	46	48	49	48
Ethnicity						
African	9	3	60	36	37	56
Asian	4	1	8	2	0	5
Hispanic	81	95	20	40	52	37
White	7	1	12	10	11	2
At Risk	74	83	59	67	52	53
Reduced or Free lunch	23	25	42	52	71	96
Passing statewide tests						
Reading	60	48	43	34	72	49
Math	50	26	43	29	85	43
Writing	70	51	59	60	69	36
Average attendance rate	90	86	95	93	95	95
Mobility	27	32	35	57	40	53

Notes. The numbers are percentages except for the school size and student mobility.

Table 2

Description of Scales in SLEQ for Principals and Sample Items

Scale Name	Description	Sample item
Student Academic Orientation	Students are interested in learning and working hard	Students are interested in learning new things (+)
School Standards	The school has realistic standards and high priority in learning	The school place a high priority in learning (+)
Principal Leadership	The principal motivates teachers and lets them know what is expected of them	I try to motivate teachers to work to their full capacity (+)
Teacher-Student Relationship	Teachers get along well with students, show interest and make students feel important	Students get along well with teachers (+)
Teacher Affiliation	Teachers encourage and accept each other	Teachers feel accepted by other teachers (+)
Teacher-Parent Relationship	Teachers inform parents and think of parents as partners in educating children	Teachers notify parents promptly about problems and needs of the student (+)
Participatory Decision Making/Freedom	Teachers are often asked to participate in administrative decisions and work without pressure	Teachers have very little to say in running schools (-)
Curriculum Innovation	Creativity and innovation are encouraged and new courses implemented	Teachers are encouraged to be innovative in this school (+)
Facilities/Resources/ Security	The school is safe and its facilities and resources are adequate	Students usually feel safe in the school (+)
Change in School Organizational Structure	The school carefully evaluates programs and opens to parent or student suggestions, school staff is effective in introducing changes or proposing improvement.	Our administrators and teachers are open to student or parent suggestions (+)

Table 3

Principals' Perceptions of Their School-Level Environments in Effective and Ineffective Schools

Scales	Number of items	Alpha rel.	Effective school principals		Ineffective school principals		Effect size
			M	SD	M	SD	
Student Academic Orientation	3	.64	4.63	0.25	4.13	0.48	1.04**
School Standards	3	.69	4.60	1.00	4.08	0.32	1.31**
Principal Leadership	3	.70	4.67	0.47	4.25	0.32	1.31**
Teacher-Student Relations	3	.86	4.67	0.47	4.17	0.33	1.52**
Teacher Affiliation	3	.84	4.50	0.64	3.83	1.11	0.60*
Teacher-Parent Relations	3	.89	4.25	0.57	3.42	0.96	0.86*
Participatory Decision Making	3	.68	4.17	0.92	3.50	0.84	0.80*
Curriculum Innovation	3	.84	4.42	0.57	4.25	0.57	0.30
Facilities/ Resources/Security	3	.70	4.50	0.33	4.25	0.74	0.30
Change in School Organizational Structure	5	.95	3.60	1.60	3.90	0.26	-1.15**

* Effect size>0.50. ** Effect size>1.00.